
MY FIRST JOURNEY WITH EXPERIENCE CAPITALIZATION

Felix Mlay



In 2017 I was invited to participate in an experience capitalization workshop organised by CTA in Kigali. I had no clue what experience capitalization was about, and what I could gain from it. When I arrived in Kigali, I found out that I was not the only one.

*Cover Participatory meeting on post-harvest handling as part of the Singida project. Every member was allowed to ask and present their views to clarify and develop a way forward
(Photo: Anthon Mtui)*

In a nutshell, experience capitalization is about making implicit knowledge explicit and sharing this knowledge widely. In the Kigali workshop, we became familiar with some of the theory, and at this point we were eager to learn how to put it into practice.

Fortunately the workshop was not just theoretical, but about actually starting your own experience capitalization process. The first step was to select an experience of your own. I needed to select an experience that I knew very well, for which there was sufficient information, and for which there was potential to draw useful and relevant lessons from.

My experience

I decided to document our experience, working as service provider for the Singida project in central Tanzania. For this project, I was the team leader in Manyoni District. The Singida project was about empowering producers and strengthening market linkages. This was mainly done through improving productivity and post-harvest handling, and by improving households' access to capital. It ran from 2015 to 2017, and was part of a larger project on marketing, infrastructure, value addition and rural finance (MIVARF) funded by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

As project leader, I knew a lot about this project, and I was responsible for writing regular progress reports. I felt I had some important lessons to share on how we were managing to improve the production of sunflowers, and improve market access and fair shares for smallholders. Furthermore, as the project had had positive results so far, I thought it would not be hard to find motivated participants to take part in the experience capitalization process.

Digging into details – the Kigali workshop

In the next part of the workshop, I had to describe the project in detail, so I looked into everything which was done so far, the results achieved and the main difficulties faced. Although I had to focus on my own case, it was good that we were there together as a group. We could discuss and give each other suggestions.

One of my challenges was that we had so many different activities in the Singida project. For example, we brought together key players like producers, processors, buyers, government officials, and financial institutions, and set up a forum committee who were actively involved in the activities of the project. To improve farming practices, we organised “farmer field schools”,

where “lead farmers” who practiced new approaches, transferred their skills and experiences to fellow farmers. To reduce post-harvest losses, we set up a warehouse, with a corresponding warehouse receipt system. To improve sales, we organised collective marketing in producer groups. It was difficult to describe so many activities but the progress reports I had written previously, and my memory, helped with this part of the process.

The next step in the workshop was the analysis, in which I had to dig a bit deeper. Why did things go wrong? And why did other things succeed? For example, some stakeholders were reluctant to be involved in the forum committee. We found out that it was because no allowances were paid. However, in the end it turned out to be positive not to pay allowances, as only the most enthusiastic people became involved. Another example is that we learned that it was very important to involve local leaders and local processors to gain farmers’ confidence for the cooperative approach we wanted to use. Their involvement helped a lot in gaining the farmers’ trust.

At the end of the workshop, I had a good description and analysis of my experience. However, I still wanted to add more information from other stakeholders, share it with my colleagues for their input, and verify the recommendations and conclusions.

At home, while preparing for the follow-up workshop in Arusha, I tried to collect more information from the farmers, the processors, and my two colleagues with whom I worked on the project. I did most of this in face-to-face meetings where I started by explaining the goal of the experience capitalization process. After this introduction, I collected their views on why things turned out positively or

negatively. In these meetings, we also discussed the best ways of sharing the experience once it is written down as a story.

Putting pen to paper – the Arusha workshop

In the second workshop, in Arusha, we discussed our progress with the process of experience capitalization. It was useful that we had each managed to describe and analyse our experiences beforehand. We were ready to write. We learned more about documenting (writing, editing), and we thought about how to go about using the lessons learned from the experience in the future. Furthermore, we discussed our sharing strategies and talked about how to mainstream the experience capitalization processes in our own organisations. It turned out that I was not alone in having enthusiastically returned from Kigali to share my first lessons on experience capitalization with my management team and colleagues.

The workshop gave me the confidence to draft a first story of my experience. I e-mailed it to my colleagues, who quickly gave me their feedback. I also sent my story to the workshop facilitators for their comments. When the article was finished, I shared it with the project stakeholders, including local politicians. In order to reach a broader audience, I am planning to publish the article in an international journal, as well as in a couple of Tanzania’s newspapers.

Besides these ambitious plans for my first story, I am working with my colleagues to get to work on documenting their experiences. I will facilitate this process and we are now trying to set up a knowledge sharing centre in the focal area of the project.

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Above Group discussion during a Trainer of Trainers session in the Singida project (Photo: Anthon Mtui)

The stories we document will be kept here, and be made available for farmers, extension officers, project staff and other stakeholders to learn from. This way, when we come across problems in other projects, we can make use of similar experiences elsewhere, to solve them. I feel that we can take this process even further: why only stick to documenting our experiences at work, we can gain a lot from also keeping track of the lessons learned from life in general!



Felix Mlay worked as marketing consultant at Mellon Consultants Tanzania Ltd, and served as project leader within the IFAD-funded project on marketing, infrastructure, value addition and rural finance (MIVARF), Tanzania. His article, “Improving sunflower production and reducing post-harvest losses” was published in 2018.

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